

Central America

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H. T. Lambrick

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Donald Goodwin

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Oxford University Press

The ubiquitous bourgeoisie

By David Landes

F. J. HOBBS: *The Age of Capital 1848-1875*. 354 pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £8.50.

I love to read Eric Hobsbawm. He knows so much, he reads everything; he translates German poetry into English rhyme; and whatever he writes about, he has something new and important to say. I also disagree with him a lot, so that reading one of his books or articles is like a good game of squash: you come away tired but invigorated and feeling victorious for the effort.

The Age of Capital is the second of Professor Hobsbawm's contributions to Sir Ronald Syme's omnibus *History of Civilization* series. The first was *The Age of Reason*, Europe 1789-1848, which dealt with the twin revolutions, industrial and French, that (along with the scientific revolution) have made the modern world. As the full title indicates, *The Age of Revolution* was intended to be a companion in a series of volumes in European history. But no one is more aware than Hobsbawm of the historical impossibility of treating Europe as an isolated entity, and in one is better equipped to describe and analyse the reciprocal relations between Europe and the rest of the world. As a result, *The Age of Revolution* was something of an innovation in synthetic works on the subject. Read only of the others; the volumes in the so-called Longman series or the Longman's General History of Europe. None of them, for all their merits, has this quality of global awareness that characterizes Professor Hobsbawm's work.

This extraversion is even more marked in *The Age of Capital*. The word "Europe" has disappeared from the title; and while the bulk of the book does treat of European history (Hobsbawm requested notes the crucial role of Europe in political, economic, ideological, scientific, and aesthetic innovation for the rest of the world), the leading theme is the expansion of Europe, the striking of distances, the thickening of trade, the intensification of all manner of links between Europe and the outside world. This is a book that has little to do with Europe and little to do with the Great Plains, the Indian, the rebellion in China, the industrial revolution in Colombia. Hobsbawm is a comparative historian to his very bones, and he cannot deal with any subject of importance without considering analogies and contrasts.

Yet some of what is gained on the wings is lost on the wings. In part because of this broad sweep and emphasis on comparisons and relationships, the book is a sort of a history of the period on aspects of this history. The reader should not expect to be able to follow the story of Europe (or Europe-in-the-world) in these years. For that, he would do well to consult H. H. Kupper's *Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, or even H. H. Kupper's *Encyclopedia of World History*.

This is not to say that the book does not hold together. The theme of expansion, that is, capitalist expansion, and triumph runs throughout, beginning with the abolition of the revolutions of 1848. To cite only one of a number of plucky vivid sentences: "The [British] industrial revolution had swallowed the [French] political revolution." This is not a theme for Professor Hobsbawm who candidly states his sympathies from the start.

The author of this book cannot conceal a certain distaste, perhaps a certain contempt, for the ego which it deals, though one mitigated by admiration for the titanic minor achievements for aid by the effort to understand even what the ego not like. It does not share the nostalgic longing for the certainty, the self-confidence, of the mid-nineteenth-century bourgeoisie world, which, temple, many, who

look back upon it from the crisis-ridden western world century later. His sympathies lie with those to whom few listened a century ago.

In short, he takes the orthodox Marxist position: bourgeois capitalism accomplished great things, but had things; and hence, capitalism was not a success. Hobsbawm consoles himself for this triumph of the forces of evil with the thought that it was short-lived. In any case both the certainty and the self-confidence were mistaken. The bourgeois triumph was brief and impetuous. At the very moment when it seemed complete, it proved to be not monolithic but full of fissures. In the early 1870s economic expansion and liberalism seemed irresistible. By the end of the decade they were no longer.

There are no advantages to the all-critical eye. Hobsbawm sees the weaknesses and shams of an era that others have looked upon as an age of equispace. The euphoric middle decades of abundance after the "longest" period of free trade, industrial expansion, democratic reforms, national realizations, and general progress. The book does something, then, to redress an over-optimistic view from the top.

But how sour the antidote! When Professor Hobsbawm says that he does not like the era, he means it. There is just about nothing in the age that pleases him.

Item: he finds it "at first sight" surprising that between 1848 and 1875 in Britain "oil sign, a large number of the world's nations and the rights to strike were abolished with remarkably little fuss". Shortly thereafter, however, he explains away this apparent gap by stating that it "hardly reserve army of labour, as Marx called it, consisting chiefly of masses of unemployed, ex-slaves, and others streaming into the cities and industrial regions, looked like the rest of the world". The leading theme is the expansion of Europe, the striking of distances, the thickening of trade, the intensification of all manner of links between Europe and the outside world. This is a book that has little to do with Europe and little to do with the Great Plains, the Indian, the rebellion in China, the industrial revolution in Colombia. Hobsbawm is a comparative historian to his very bones, and he cannot deal with any subject of importance without considering analogies and contrasts.

Item: as the above quotation hints, Hobsbawm is reluctant to recognize even the Great Migration as a positive phenomenon. The emigrants, he says, were rounded up by "human cattle" and sent to the conditions in the receiving country. "Into the hold of ship-plate companies, anxious to fill their ships, these emigrants were packed. These companies sent them to the public authorities and railroad companies interested in populating their empty territories, mine owners, ironmasters and other employers of raw labour who needed hands." These agents were paid by these, and by the women who might be forced to cross half of a strong, confident, and avowedly on the Atlantic crossing. (My grand-father, who was glad to lead his family halfway across Europe after the shabby Kishinev pogrom of 1903, to take ship at Hamburg for founded by this picture.)

Item: Hobsbawm gives little or no weight to the power of principle, democracy, or the power of the "people". The "defenders of the people" are the more democratic politicians, not just Napoleon III and Disraeli, but even the working class. The "defenders of the people" are the more democratic politicians, not just Napoleon III and Disraeli, but even the working class. The "defenders of the people" are the more democratic politicians, not just Napoleon III and Disraeli, but even the working class.

For moral reasons, but because they seemed incompatible with a market society based on the pursuit of individual interests. Yet Hobsbawm notes that emancipation in Russia locked the peasant into a communal structure that posed serious impediments to market freedom and individual interest.

The American Civil War? Professor Hobsbawm offers various and scattered explanations. He speaks of "the very process of global capitalist expansion" and the ambitions of the industrial world.

Thus the American Civil War, whatever its political origins, was the triumph of the industrialized North over the agrarian South, almost, one might even say, the triumph of the South from the informal empire of Britain to the cotton industry it was the economic pendant into the new major industrial economy of the United States.

The South, in other words, was a prize of war between capitalist competitors. Later on, Hobsbawm goes into the political origins of the conflict: "What was the American Civil War, if not the attempt to maintain the unity of the American Nation against disruption?"

Where is slavery in all this, or anti-slavery? It comes up much later, it can hardly be denied that slavery was the central institution of Southern society, and not it was the major cause of friction and rupture between the Northern and Southern states. It can hardly be denied, but Hobsbawm conveys the impression that he would like to deny it. He goes on:

The real question is why it should have led to secession and civil war, rather than to some sort of compromise, or even to a gradual abolitionism. After all, militant abolitionism alone was never strong enough to determine the Union policy. And Northerners, who were not even the private views of businessmen, might well have found it as possible and convenient to come to terms with and exploit a slave South as international business with the "apocryphal" South Africa.

Really? Which is the same country? Is the answer justified? As the last word on the matter, I ask these questions, not because I have doubts about the capacity of government or of the people, but because I am sure, much like business with any one of the systems, by political slave labour in the black in South Africa and will pay the same price for both. My point is simply that Professor Hobsbawm, like every other student of history, is too much preoccupied with the power of the Union to consider the possibility of a question—what is the question?—that is historically inappropriate and untrue.

This intrusion of an all-pervasive business interest shows again in the treatment of vigilante justice. Professor Hobsbawm notes with some hyperbole the problem of lawlessness in the United States: "There called government by European standards." But rather than treat the problem as the "response" of the law to the problem, he describes it only as an instrument of greedy "robber barons". The fact is that it was sometimes arranged as a deplorable circumstance for "improvement" of the "vitality". There are things that Hobsbawm simply cannot find the strength or heart to write.

In general, Hobsbawm feels that only a "congenial optimism" could see imperialism in this period as positive, on balance. I suspect that he would say the same for any other period, which adds up to the fact that he is a big mouse. Yet when it is said and done, there are few ex-colonial countries today that would be better off if they had never been brought within the ambit of Western political and economic power—for the abuse, exploitation and oppression they were subjected to by greedy, but condescendingly benevolent, "robbers". None of these

miners. Yet, even allowing for this, (the myth) should not be idealized. The dream of freedom did not apply to the Indians or the Chinese (who formed almost a third of the population of Idaho in 1870). In the Pacific southwest—Texas belonged to the Confederacy—it certainly did not apply to the Negroes. And though so much of what we regard as "western", from the cowboy's costume to the Spanish-based "Californian" custom, which became the effective mining law in the American mountains, derived from the Mexicans, who probably also supplied more cowboys than any other single group, it did not apply to the Mexicans. It was a dream of poor whites, who hoped to place the private enterprise of the bourgeois world by gambling, gold and guns.

It goes without saying that Hobsbawm is opposed to imperialism and colonialism. The world is divided for him into winners and losers, victors and victims. To be sure, he writes of the "objectively" (my word) positive aspects of the American defeat of Mexico in 1848 and the British conquest of India; and he might well have alluded also to Engels's glorification at the French conquest of Algeria.

To Marx and Engels, Imperial control by the wealthier, more powerful European was an inevitable response to the opportunities offered by the disorganized, disorderly and despotic (India) or feudal tribal societies (Algeria). For all its cruelties and abuse of power, it constituted a necessary stage in the progress of freedom to the movement of integration in the capitalist order, and thence, eventually, to socialism.

Professor Hobsbawm is less optimistic on this point. "The gains," he says, "were hard to discern in the third quarter of the nineteenth century." He reluctantly concedes the possibility of a dim light in the distance: "There was, perhaps, a substitution of order for public disorder, security for insecurity in some areas which came under the same colonial rule." (The fact is that order, wherever it came, was Western pressure and not made themselves felt—thus the Ottoman Empire, or Sicily and southern Italy for that matter, which, though nominally Western, were also waiting to be integrated into the world of bourgeois capitalism.) As for population, which responds to security, improved sanitation, and new sources of income by increasing with unprecedented rapidity and persistence—in spite of severe local famines—Hobsbawm professes to emphasize the contrast with the far more favourable living conditions and demographic circumstances of the advanced nations.

It is difficult to say whether the situation was worse than in the first half of the century (though this was probably so in India and China), or merely unchanged. In any case the contrast with the developed countries during the same period was dramatic, even if we grant (as seems likely for the Islamic world) that the age of traditional and cosmopolitan democratic governments was a very giving way to a new population pattern in the second half of the century.

(The last remark has to be understood as a deplorable circumstance for "improvement" of the "vitality". There are things that Hobsbawm simply cannot find the strength or heart to write.)

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was invented by the Western mind; they were already there. Even the element of alien rule was not new—as Marx noted with regard to India, but as was equally true to China (the Manchus), or Egypt (Mamlukes and Turks), or the Copis, the Muslim Arabs), or the south-east (the Zulus). At least the West had something positive to offer by way of compensation.

All of this represents a strenuous effort to reconcile classical Marxism with today's neo-Marxism without explicit disparagement of the judgment of the Great Father; and to reconcile both of these with one resolute fact, Colonialism is just one of several topics that pose serious difficulties in this regard. Nationalism is another. The bourgeois family is still another.

Nationalism was one of the major forces of European history during these years, which saw the unification of Germany and Italy, the rise of autonomist or independent movements in the Austrian and Ottoman empires, and the Polish restlessness in Ireland and Poland. Nationalism, as Namier masterfully demonstrated in 1848: *The Revolution of the Intellectuals*, was the nemesis of the bourgeoisie in Europe, but one who would not know it from this book.

Butler is invisible in *The Age of Capital*; he appears in neither footnotes nor bibliography—not even where one would expect to find him as one of several topics that pose serious difficulties in this regard. Nationalism is another. The bourgeois family is still another.

The significant point here is that the typical "unhistorical" or "semi-historical" notion was also a small nation, and this faced nineteenth-century nationalism with a dilemma which has rarely been recognized. For the champions of the "nation-state" (why the inverted commas?) assume, not only that it must be national, but also that it must be "progressive", i.e. capable of developing a viable economy, technology, state organization and military force, i.e. that it must be at least minimally large. It was to be, in fact, the "natural" unit of the development of the modern, liberal, progressive and de facto bourgeois society.

To be sure, there was a strong element of idealism in this, perhaps a stranger one of special pleading in such arguments. Some nations—the large, the advanced—the idealists' own—were destined by history to prevail. "But," Hobsbawm tells us, "this must not be interpreted simply as a conspiracy of some nations to oppress others, though spokesmen of the unconquered nations could hardly be blamed for thinking so. Why not? Because, he says, this kind of cultural and national subordination was not prescribed simply for small groups outside one's borders; the French, Germans and Italians imposed it on their own linguistic and ethnic minorities. I find his reasoning hard to follow.

It was even such a true-blue ideal as Friedrich Engels who said: "The principle of national self-determination was not prescribed simply for small groups outside one's borders; the French, Germans and Italians imposed it on their own linguistic and ethnic minorities. I find his reasoning hard to follow.

and aspirations of "those" which, after having figured for a longer or shorter period on the stage of history, were finally absorbed as integral portions into the one or the other of those more powerful nations. As for Poland, Engels thought it "one nation future": "A nation which can at best muster 20,000 to 30,000 men has no voice."

Professor Hobsbawm, while adopting and adopting the Engels criterion of history, is not comfortable with these evidences of prejudice and passion. He refers to them only as "passive", in a footnote, as "operational", and concedes on "element of great nation nationalism in such views . . . not easily to be denied even in Frederick Engels". (The fact is that neither Frederick Engels nor Karl Marx was what one could call a nice person, generous towards others and sensitive in matters of personal self-respect. Their correspondence and writings are sprinkled with pejorative personal, national, ethnic, and religious epithets and remarks, with special contempt or venom reserved for Jewish adversaries and targets. Their animus deserves more attention even in a general history like this—especially from someone who knows them so well as Professor Hobsbawm.)

Professor Hobsbawm seems to treat nationalism as though it were an ideology—like socialism or communism.

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"Engle Wharf", 1859, on the Thames opposite Rotherhithe; one of the 149 illustrations in Maria Phipps's *Selected Etchings of James A. McW. Whistler* (xxxvii plus illustrations. Dover/Constable, £3.25).

that is precisely the way I would expect domineering nationalism to behave.

Is one to infer that Hobsbawm accepts the distinction between visible and invisible, or even legitimate and illegitimate, nationalism? He does draw the line between what he calls modern nationalism and "proto-nationalism".

But can we call the rebellions of peasants and nomads against foreign rule "nationalism", when united only [sic] by the consciousness of oppression, by the xenophobia and by an attachment to ancient tradition, the true faith and a vague sense of ethnic identity? Only when they happened to be attacked for one reason or another to modern national movements.

So he is sceptical of the risings in the Balkans that led to the creation of such states as Romania and Bulgaria; but he accepts the true nationalism of the Irish. The remarks in a footnote on page 92: "Marx supported the 'national' and was in correspondence with Proudhon leaders." Similarly, he lays stress on the middle-class character of many nationalisms, though he concedes that in this period "nationalism increasingly became a mass force". That would seem to imply a contradiction with *The Communist Manifesto*, which he says "was less unrealistic than is often supposed in stating that 'the workers have no country'." Professor Hobsbawm argues that there was no conflict: good socialists could be patriotic Frenchmen or Germans; which did not mean that they had to espouse the national and bourgeois governments. No doubt—but that is just not good

enough for a historian. That kind of have-it-both-ways argument was better reserved for election campaigns. It will not help us to understand the real dilemma nationalism posed to international socialism, as in 1914, or vice versa, as in 1939-40.

Much of the difficulty, I suspect, is explained by Hobsbawm's failure to consider the psychological roots of nationalism. Read under the better when he linked it to so fundamental a human drive as narcissism. It is a deep-rooted, powerful sentiment, a commitment that returns dividends of self-esteem, often accompanied by gratifying feelings of superiority. It has been the great enemy of revolutionary solidarity, and it continues to threaten the unity of the great Soviet empire; but it has also forced the dissolution of colonial empires in our own time and remains even now a focus of anti-Western sentiment in the Third World. I can understand Hobsbawm's ambivalence and ambiguity about the phenomenon: he likes others.

The letter in question went from a concerned father to his son or school, who was not performing to his family's expectations. It expresses, as well as anything I know, not only the compatibility of the bourgeois family with a competitive economy, but the functional role of the family as a vehicle for socialization (in the sociologist's sense) of the young, the better to prepare them for a life of struggle. As for the exaggerated paternal authority and dominance that Hobsbawm imputes to the bourgeois family, it was neither peculiar in that class nor unambiguous in its operation. Professor Hobsbawm equates the superiority

to the efforts of the isolated individual, to equality of rights and opportunities and freedom, rest on an institution which so totally denied all of these?

Why indeed? The "apparent conflict" has "rarely even been noticed" because there was no conflict. The bourgeois family went back to an earlier, less secure age and developed its characteristics of intimacy, paternal authority, privacy, and solidarity in response to the hazards and opportunities of a competitive society. The contradiction perceived by Hobsbawm derives from his own excess of system, he cites by way of support his chapter called "The Bourgeois World" some lines from a French cotton spinner to his son:

You know that we belong to a century when men are only valued for what is in them. Every day some master, insufficiently energetic or serious, is forced to descend from the ranks in society which seemed to be permanently his, and some intelligent and plucky clerk takes his place.

Butressed by clothes, wells and objects, there was the bourgeois family, the most mysterious institution of the age. For, if it is easy to discover or to devise conditions between puritanism and the bourgeoisie, as a large literature bears witness, those between nineteenth-century family structure and bourgeois society remain obscure. Indeed the apparent conflict between the two has rarely even been noticed. Why should a society dedicated to an economy of production-making competitive enterprise,

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The nation within

By Duncan Macleod

LESTER J. MILLER:

The Search for a Black Nationality
Black Colonization and Emigration
1957-1967
320pp. University of Illinois Press
£10.95, \$19.95.

Although the term "black nationalism" proved highly evocative in the 1960s, the concept of a black nationality has been a topic of American nationality long preceded that decade. Several attempts had been made, moreover, to detach it from the American national context. These ranged from plans for the establishment of a separate black state, or states, within the present territorial limits of the United States, to the development of links with African and Caribbean nationalism and to Pan-Africanism, and to the development of coherent emigration movements. *The Search for a Black Nationality* deals with two periods of black nationalism. The first culminated in the efforts of Paul Cuffee and in the Haitian emigration of the mid-1820s; the second was associated with the emigration of Mordecai Delany and Theodore Holly in the 1850s. Lloyd J. Miller explains how and why these episodes significantly developed the idea of black nationalism.

This account is narrative in form, judicious and scholarly in method, and opportunistic. From it there emerges a clear picture of both the movements and the more obscure views of the attitudes of such leaders as Richard Allen and James Forten. It appears that while they opposed the activity of the American Colonization Society, they supported the Haitian project. Miller's account does present some problems. His first period, he is not very successful in linking the two episodes he describes. The perspective of the later period, which is the focus of the book, is not very convincing. Whether expressed in emigrationist terms or otherwise, the demand for black separatism has never been a dominant motif of black political leadership, so far as can be ascertained. The relative strengths of separatist and integrationist thrusts have varied over time. In more or less direct correlation with the degree of confidence blacks have been able to feel in their future in America, the American Revolution held out prospects for improvement. At the same time it left a legacy of more subtle webs of discrimination than those which escaped from the institution. But the 1830s and early 1840s were a unique period in which there was optimism and progress. There were and there was reason for blacks to share in that optimism. The success of British abolition might encourage a Woodson to seek asylum in the British Empire but led others to try to reproduce that success in America itself. Despite continuing discrimination, black spirits were further raised by the growth of abolitionism and by the antislavery efforts in Congress of men like John Quincy Adams.

However, the abolitionists of the 1840s and 1850s, the fugitive slave law of 1850, the appearance of a "drinking-water" all-black church, the resurgence of separatist ideas, and the greater attention to the black church, would have led to a more optimistic integration of Mr. Miller's thesis. The book does rely on the reliance upon Woodson.

The second major problem of Miller's book is that he never conveys a clear view of what he means by nationalism. He obviously uses the term in something other than a purely territorial or institutional sense. His title, and his evidence, suggest, moreover, something substantive. He is surely right in pointing out that the psychological term and he is right, too, to see it as a tendency rather than as an achieved and coherent reality. Still, the term, as he admits, is ambiguous. It has not also some of his photographs show him to be,

specific content, and that content must, presumably, relate to a sense of community. In what sense, then, were blacks a community? And how did emigration serve it?

The pressures toward community were external and negative rather than internal and positive. They arose from discrimination rather than, for example, from a shared cultural heritage or territory. But in both Mr. Miller's period; the emigrationists were a minority and had to face a wide-spread hostility toward their ideas. When Delany's Emigration Convention of 1854 had come by 1859 to oppose a general emigration.

Theodore Holly and Henry Highland Garnet were propelled by missionary motives, their object being the regeneration of the African and Yoruba peoples respectively. They were less concerned to serve the North American black community than they were to serve the societies in which they proposed to live. They wished to export, moreover, not merely Protestant Christianity but also a material culture and value system which was explicitly Anglo-Saxon. There is little evidence that even Delany, with his implicitly secular approach, had much sense of a black community.

Mr. Miller argues that later events in the United States indicate that the emigrationists were the realists; they saw the future must clearly. Perhaps it is only their general failure which enables us to see them in this light. Was emigration a better alternative than remaining in the United States? The evidence of the 1820s and 1830s hardly makes one think so. Men like Richard Allen and Frederick Douglass who appealed to a sense of community looked more closely to the interest of the slaves as well as the free blacks, and who sought to establish nationwide institutions to further these interests, were in fact the realists. These were the men who built upon and developed the sense of a black community and in doing so helped to create a black nation, albeit a nation within a nation.

Mr. Miller's book is important for what it tells us about the emigration movement. It is less important for what it tells us about black nationalism. It has linked that concept too closely to a search for its institutionalization. Some of the paradoxes of black nationalism, those who argued for a separate black nation were not those who insisted that within the United States and who sought to create a sense of black solidarity in order to secure that future.

By C. H. Rolph

PETER MAAS:
King of the Gypsies
171pp. Cape. £3.50.

This violent and shocking book about the sixty-year American gypsy claims could do much to rehabilitate our native ones by throwing up confounding comparisons. The murderous and tyrannical "King of the Gypsies" was a man named Steve, a white, over-muscled, and wholly unattractive, the most odious character in the book. He chose for a subject, and yet he could be said that such gypsies, as a social class, are largely what Western society has made them. Through the ages the persecutions and killings have been appalling, not even stopping with the murder of the million gypsies tricked into Hitler's chambers by the promise of relief.

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St Patrick's Day, 1867, by Thomas Nast: one of the illustrations from *Destination America*.

Inter-continental drift

By Hugh Brogan

MALDWIN A. JONES:
Destination America
256pp. Weldonfeld and Nicolson.
£4.95.

Thomas Tavisian must be an enterprising company. Not only has it prepared a series of broadcasts on the epic theme of migration to the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it has also added to the series a number of useful interviews with immigrants and the descendants of immigrants. The series is a book to accompany the series. Presumably it is hoped that the book will lead to the lessons of the past. As a book, it is excellent. It is well written, well illustrated, and well organized. It is a book to read, and it is a book to read.

By C. H. Rolph

PETER MAAS:

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would be odious; they are in fact complementary, because, though they cover exactly the same ground, the authors are very different men.

The subject is heroic, and cannot be treated on too large a scale: the ungrateful United States which long ago rejected the immigrants of the 1820s. Nevertheless, Professor Jones is amazingly successful in covering the ground, and in finding room for the telling detail. He rightly decided, since something had to be sacrificed, to concentrate on the largest emigrant groups: the Irish, English, Germans, Scandinavians, Italians and East Europeans. He has also included a chapter on the Jews, even if this meant saying too little about the Welsh. He gives masterful sketches of the conditions in Europe which prompted the decision to travel, and of the conditions on the ships and in the new lands. He takes enormous pains to convey the immigrant experience in America after it was reached, and to show the letters home, and the letters of success, and the letters of failure. He also includes a chapter on the Irish, and a chapter on the Jews, and a chapter on the Welsh. He gives masterful sketches of the conditions in Europe which prompted the decision to travel, and of the conditions on the ships and in the new lands. He takes enormous pains to convey the immigrant experience in America after it was reached, and to show the letters home, and the letters of success, and the letters of failure. He also includes a chapter on the Irish, and a chapter on the Jews, and a chapter on the Welsh.

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The destiny of democracy

By Maurice Cranston

ROBERT NISBET:

Twilight of Authority
272pp. Heinemann £4.80.

Robert Nisbet's new book *Twilight of Authority* is about the present condition of America, and since what happens in America today tends to happen in other places, it is of more than local interest. Indeed, Professor Nisbet could well be seen as continuing where Tocqueville left off, in seeking in American experience the destiny of democracy itself. The two main themes of his book are the decline of authority and the rise of social authority, and the rise of political, bureaucratic and military power.

Since authority is a concept to which little thought is commonly given, the very word "authority" being for many people synonymously associated with "authoritarianism", Nisbet's argument may need some explanation. Power of any kind is seen as a potential or actual danger to freedom, only because it rests ultimately on the sanction of force. Authority differs from power in many ways, one of which is that, far from being antithetical to freedom, it entails freedom. Authority depends in part on the consent of those who believe in it, so that without liberty there can be no authority. There are other important aspects of authority—sets of rules, institutions, the ability to win assent and so on, which are all of interest to Nisbet as a sociologist—but the characteristic of authority that matters most in the present argument is that unlike power, it depends on freedom. It is chiefly for this reason that Nisbet approves of authority as not of power: for authority can function without any structures of compulsion or coercion, whereas power without the sword is scarcely power at all.

The decline of authority which Nisbet discerns in modern society is a decline of free belief in, and respect for, social and cultural values, and as authority cannot exist without people's belief in it, its decline leaves a void which the power of so ever more total and totalitarian states can quickly to fill. Last this abridgement of Nisbet's argument should give the impression that he is some kind of old-fashioned conservative, bemoaning the passing of faith and deference. It should be added that his views on both power and authority are informed by his deep admiration for French, and especially for American, thought. Nisbet's understanding of authority, if he accepts, as they did not, the necessity of state structures, has been so with a palpable lack of enthusiasm. He thinks that when

a society solves its own problems there is liberty, and that whenever the state intervenes, whenever politicians and bureaucrats and soldiers such as around, freedom goes. It is not easy to disagree with him, although I myself would make higher claims for the value of politics than Nisbet seems willing to accept.

Traditionally Americans have mistrusted the state. The founding fathers were never infected by the Continental republican belief that a republic, being a people's thing, could be magnified only to the public advantage. They inherited from their British Whig forebears the belief that all state power is a mischief, and that the only way to hold it in check, Progressive ideology has, however, done much to reverse this attitude, with the paradoxical consequence that contemporary Americans, while more contemptuous than ever of politicians as a class, either assign to the state or allow the state to assume an ever-increasing control of their lives.

It is arguable that the traditional American preference for a minimal state placed an intolerably heavy burden on society itself, on unwritten laws and purely social authority, in the shaping of American life. The almost miraculous achievement of the United States in producing a community of near equals out of an immigrant stock of enormous diversity was not the work of America's political institutions; it was the work of American social institutions, schools, churches, neighbourhood associations, and suchlike; still more it was the work of the universal belief that it was a good thing to be or to become an American. Until recently, both the value and the need for voluntary social conformity was felt more acutely in the United States than anywhere else in the world; it was a belief that

went together with these American ideals of social equality and political liberty, which compose between them the better part of what Americans understand by democracy.

Among Europeans, even among Canadians (who remained in cultural formation European), no such intense demands for social conformity were needed; class and family imposed the norms of custom, habit and tradition. Society had not the self-conscious existence that it had in the United States, and it performed a less important duty. What Nisbet calls the "twilight of authority" in America may well be so marked in America because authority, in the sense of social authority, has been over-stretched there in the past, and is now produced a reaction.

What we cannot do is excuse the Americans of losing sight of their ideas of liberty and equality. Nisbet only prompts us to suspect that many of them may be losing sight of the common advantage. The new idea of equality is equality of condition instead of the traditional idea of equality of rights. It is an idea which can only be put into practice by a massive enlargement of the activity of government. This is why the latest trends in fashionable thinking in America have at the same time diminished social authority and increased state power, and why those movements of opinion which see themselves as radical and progressive are seen by Nisbet as profoundly retrogressive.

He suggests that the decline in the Whiggish conception of freedom

and a desire for the enlargement of the state may be dated from the time of Woodrow Wilson—that melancholy archetype of the academic political scientist in office as head of government. Wilson's technique of employing intellectuals who had never been elected to any public office to advise and help him govern was, at once, adopted by Franklin Roosevelt and J. F. Kennedy, with great advantage to their images, but less advantage, according to Nisbet, to the public good. Nisbet does not subscribe to the naive view that these presidents were popular with intellectuals because they provided jobs; he notes that they were popular because they were "strong".

Intellectuals as a class, from Bacon through Voltaire to Mrs Webb, have yearned for enlightened despotism, and Nisbet's word for the unbridled egotism of the White House is "royalist". In the aftermath of Watergate, Nisbet may expect a more apocalyptic hearing for this suggestion than he would once have had. For one thing that once Nixon was seen as a dishonest career was the extent to which the structure of a "strong presidential state" gave the occupant of the White House more personal power than any king in London had exercised since the seventeenth century. Once Nixon was seen as a dishonest monarch, Roosevelt and Kennedy had to be seen as honest monarchs, and Americans had to ask themselves whether a monarch, however honest, was what they really wanted.

The "royalist" intellectuals, as Nisbet calls them, plainly do. If some of them dream of the individual, the real molecule of society, and he adds that an aim towards the family was a predictable outcome of egalitarian ideology. The cult of equality was in part an attack on the hierarchical elements in kinship. Nisbet believes that there can be no sound social order and no settled liberty unless the kinship tie is sustained, and this is one of the main reasons he gives for saying that egalitarianism, in the sense of the demand for equality of condition, is incompatible with liberty—this in addition to the fact that such equality of condition can be imposed only by state power.

How else are we to account for the entry into war in Vietnam without so much as a bow in the

direction of Congress, whom initiative or enthusiasm from the professional military, or for that matter from the older professional politicians in Congress, and least of all from the major economic interests? None of these issued the decisive command to President Kennedy that resulted in the dispatch of 16,000 military soldiers to Saigon under a four-star general in their command that led President Johnson to escalate that contingency in something of the order of half a million soldiers. Nor did any of these groups plan the unseemly act that made American participation irrevocable.

Intellectuals, too, are blamed—and not unreasonably so—by Nisbet for encouraging the belief that good problems, such as the unbridled egotism of the White House, can be solved by political or judicial fiat. Even the most hardened *despot* in Europe today finds it hard to believe the extent to which the American Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the American courts dictate not only what shall not be done but what shall be done about abortion, the upbringing and schooling of children, the hiring of academic faculty, and dozens of other matters which are properly the concern of the family or of private institutions.

However, it is part of Nisbet's argument that the family itself has been diminished as a result of the emphasis that is put on the nuclear-state, and on the individual. Nisbet argues that the family, not the individual, is the real molecule of society; and he adds that an aim towards the family was a predictable outcome of egalitarian ideology. The cult of equality was in part an attack on the hierarchical elements in kinship. Nisbet believes that there can be no sound social order and no settled liberty unless the kinship tie is sustained, and this is one of the main reasons he gives for saying that egalitarianism, in the sense of the demand for equality of condition, is incompatible with liberty—this in addition to the fact that such equality of condition can be imposed only by state power.

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One of Edward Weston's brilliantly expressive black-and-white photographs, specially commissioned for the edition of *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass*, published in 1942 by the Limited Editions Club of New York, and is now reprinted (204p and 49 illustrations. Princeton Press, £10.95). There is a new introduction by Richard E. Bickel.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

MANCHESTER BUSINESS SCHOOL

ASSISTANT LIBRARIAN

Applications are invited for this post in the Manchester Business School Library. The post holder will be responsible for the supervision of staff and the management of the department. Applications should be sent to the Head of the Department, Manchester Business School, Manchester, Greater Manchester. Closing date 18th June 1976.

Further details and application forms are available from the Assistant County Librarian, Peterborough Divisional Library Headquarters, Broadway, Peterborough PE1 1RX, telephone 69105/8, to whom applications must be returned by 18th June 1976.

8 Riverside Road, West Kirby, Wirral, Merseyside, Merseyside. Application forms from the Director of Leisure Services, to be returned by 18 June.

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